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IN THE PATH OF NAPOLEON

100 Years After His Downfall

By JAMES MORGAN

MARENGO, THE BATTLE THAT WAS LOST AND WON

The Battle of Marengo, which Napoleon crossed the Alps to fight, was his poorest battle and most decisive victory. At 3 he had lost the day, but by lucky chances he had regained it at 6.

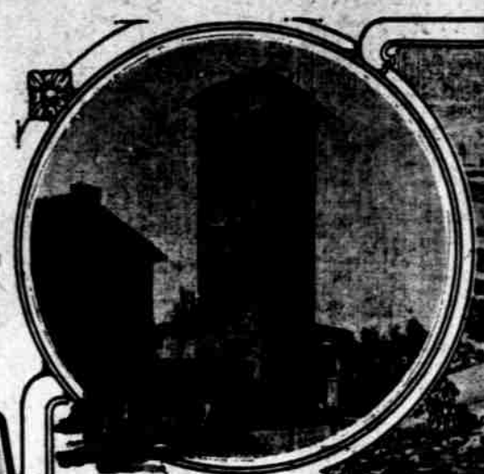
At a single blow he recaptured Italy and gained such prestige that he did not have to draw his sword again for more than five years. Moreover, it might properly be called the "battle that won Napoleon his crown."

Mr. Morgan's sketch of his visit to the banks of the little brook, where the destiny of Europe was decided for fifteen years, and to the many monuments on the field of Marengo, is a fresh contribution to Napoleonic history.

STATUE OF NAPOLEON IN THE COURT OF HONOR, MARENGO

(ROPES COLL. MASS. MIL. HIST. SOC.)

GEN. KELLERMANN, WHO WON THE BATTLE



THE OLD TOWER OF THEODORIC ON THE BATTLEFIELD

GEN. DESAIX, KILLED AT MARENGO (HIS BUST IN THE PARK)

THE BATTLE of MARENGO · (FROM AN OLD PRINT)

NAPOLEON RALLYING HIS FLEEING TROOPS (by Vernet)

THE MEMORIAL PALACE AT MARENGO ·

THE BATTLE THAT WON A CROWN

DATES AND EVENTS—SEE 30-32.

May 20, 1800—Napoleon crossed the Alps.
May 22, 1800—Passed Fort of Bard.
June 2, 1800—Entered Milan.
June 4, 1800—Massena surrendered Genoa.
June 14, 1800—Battle of Marengo.
June 15, 1800—Evacuation of Upper Italy by Austria.
July 2, 1800—Napoleon returned to Paris.
September 26, 1800—Understanding between Napoleon and Czar Paul.
September 30, 1800—Treaty with the United States.
October 1, 1800—Spain ceded Louisiana to France.
December 2, 1800—Battle of Hohenlinden, won by Moreau.
February 9, 1801—Treaty of peace with Austria at Luneville.
April 2, 1801—Battle of Copenhagen.
June 27, 1801—French surrendered Cairo.
March 27, 1802—Treaty of peace with England at Amient.

NAPOLEON, two months before he crossed the Alps, lay on a big map of Italy, which had been spread on the floor of the Tuileries in Paris. As he studied the map he stuck pins in it, here and there, some of them tipped with red wax and the others with black.

Bourrienne, who knelt on the map beside him, says that when Napoleon had finished this operation he asked, "Where do you think I shall beat Melas?"

"How the devil should I know?" Bourrienne replied.

"Why, look here, you fool," said the other man on the floor. "Melas is at Alessandria with his headquarters. There he will remain until Genoa surrenders. Crossing the Alps here," and he pointed to a red pin at the Great St. Bernard, "I shall fall upon him, cut his communications and meet him there," pointing to a red pin at San Giuliano. "Poor M de Melas," he chuckled, "he will pass through Turin, fall back upon Alessandria, I shall cross the Po, overtake him on the road to Piacenza, on the plains of the Scrivia, and I shall beat him just there, just there!"

It was in June, 1800, nearly three months after that reported forecast, when Bourrienne found himself watching from the height of San Giuliano the smoke of battle rising from the field of Marengo. Napoleon had crossed the Alps, cut the communications of Gen. Melas, the Austrian commander in Italy, and now was meeting him in the valley below San Giuliano.

Escaping a Trap.

Melas had laughed at the absurd reports that the French were climbing over the Alpine wall. Intent only on his original plan of invading France by the coast road, he was pressing Massena for the surrender of Genoa. While thus engaged he received convincing reports that not only had Napoleon crossed the Alps, but also that the French infantry and some of their cavalry had passed the Fort of Bard by climbing a goat path over a mountain that rose above the castle which still stands like a watch dog in the narrow vale of the Dora Baltea.

Before Napoleon himself had made the passage and while he was yet at Martigny in Switzerland, word had come back to him that a little Austrian garrison in the Fort of Bard was blocking the advance of his forces into Italy. If that Austrian outpost should hold them up long enough to summon re-enforcements from Gen. Melas, the spectacular crossing of the Alps would pass into history as a fool's errand and Napoleon would be covered with condemnation at home and ridicule abroad. He had staked his own fortunes and probably the existence of the republic itself to win or lose on a single chance.

If the conditions were reversed, if he had the Austrians in such a trap, he would not let them escape him. But he never assumed that the enemy was as clever as he, and he always reckoned on his boldness saving him from the cold logic of a situation.

The ease with which the French slipped out of the trap at the Fort of Bard is really incredible. They simply wrapped the rattling parts of their gun carriages, and spread a carpeting of manure on the road before the fort in the darkness of night, after which they dragged their artillery silently past under the noses of the sleeping garrison.

Fall of Genoa.

Napoleon then hastened to Milan, where he completely cut the enemy's communications with Vienna and cut off the Austrian line of retreat. While he slept in his Milan palace, Bourrienne entered his room at 4 o'clock in the morning, and shook his arm until he succeeded in arousing him. His standing orders to his secretary were: "During the night enter my chamber as seldom as possible. Do not wake me when you have any good news to communicate; with that there is no hurry. But when you bring bad news, arouse me instantly, for then there is not a moment to be lost."

In this instance dispatches passing between the Austrian government and its army had been intercepted, and Bourrienne read them to his awakened chief. A letter from the authorities at Vienna assured Gen. Melas there was no such thing as a French army of reserve and that he should advance into France without paying any attention to the incredible tales about Napoleon crossing the Alps. But when the secretary read a letter from Melas announcing that Massena had surrendered Genoa to the Austrians, Napoleon for a moment was unwilling to believe it. "Bah," he exclaimed, "you do not understand German."

Genoa really had fallen, but the French there had held out long enough to detain the Austrians from advancing into France until Napoleon had them by the coat tails. They were now shut in between him and the Alps, and instead of invading France they must turn in an effort to cut their way to safety through the French ranks that covered the roads across Italy.

The Battle of Marengo.

The battle came before either side was properly prepared for it. Taken by surprise, Melas had been able to assemble of his immense but widely scattered forces only about 30,000 men at Alessandria, when the French presented themselves before the brick wall of that town, an important place sixty miles south of Milan. Napoleon, on his part, had neglected for once his adopted maxim that "God is always on the side of the heaviest battalions." He had tempted fate by so dispersing his army as to bring perhaps only 20,000 men to the field of action and only forty guns to meet the fire of 200 Austrian guns.

Although he had long counted on finding Melas at Alessandria, he had lost faith in his own prediction. He rode in a hard rain almost to the town gate the day before the battle, and finding no signs of a large force present there, he went away. When, therefore, Melas sallied out of the gate next morning at break of day, there was only a thin French line drawn across his avenue of escape.

For five hours this small force had struggled to restrain the advance of the Austrians, when at 10 o'clock Napoleon galloped upon the scene of battle for the first time with his old Guides, now the Consular Guard, arrayed wearing the cloak which was destined to cover his coffin when it was borne to the willows at St. Helena.

A Great Football Field.

Nearly all the famous battlefields were appointed such by nature and not by military strategists. We hear of warriors selecting fields of combat, but they only seek out the places chosen for them long ages before they were born, generally beside a stream or a hill.

Looking down from the old legendary tower of Theodoric, the great Ostrogoth, which still rises among the orchard trees of Marengo, one sees a lazy little creek meandering over the broad plain that lies before the eastern gate of Alessandria. The plain is like a great football field, bordered on either side by hills that rise like the tiers of a grandstand, with the River Bormida washing the old walls of Alessandria at one end and the heights of San Giuliano rising at the other end of the gridiron, while the tiny rivulet Fontanone is the 50-yard line.

Across that mere brooklet the battle of Marengo was fought. There, by the steep banks of a reedy ditch, the history of Europe was decided for fifteen years. At 2 o'clock of a June afternoon it was decided favorably to Austria and adversely to France, for then Melas had crossed the creek and smashed Napoleon's army into fragments. Many of the French were in a rout, but others stubbornly contested the ground inch by inch as they slowly retreated over the plain. Lannes, falling back at the head of a small brigade, yielded only a mile in two hours. But at last the Consular Guard itself gave way under a blazing artillery fire.

Napoleon in Person.

The Battle of Marengo was lost, and with it, very likely, Napoleon's chance for empire. A messenger hastily stole away to carry to the enemies of the first consul in Paris the welcome news that fortune had deserted him. Revolutionary Paris need no longer fear his iron hand.

Gen. Melas, suffering from the heat and burdened with his seventy years—Austria persisted in her policy of sending old men to whip this Corsican youth—left the field of victory for his headquarters in Alessandria. Having silenced all but five of the French cannon, it was time for the aged general to lie down and dictate a report, telling the Emperor of Austria how he had slain the Goliath of the revolution with the pebbles of the Brook Fontanone.

Meanwhile Napoleon was sitting on the ground, behind the sheltering walls of the little village of Marengo, the Consular Guard drawn up about him. His maps were spread beside him, but he was not looking at them, nor seemingly at his fleeing soldiers as they passed him. He did not lift his finger in an effort to rally them. His boldness seemed to have forsaken him, as he sat there beating up the dust with his riding whip.

Rallying a Routed Army.

He still entertained a hope, however, that before the slow-going Austrians recovered from their victory and adopted measures for following it up, Gen. Desaix, whom he had ordered elsewhere, might yet come to the rescue. While he waited and hoped, Savary, an aid-de-camp of Desaix, dashed up to report that his general, having heard the sound of battle, was hastening to the scene with his 5,000 men.

At this news the vanquished sniffed a chance of victory. "At what hour did you leave Desaix?" he inquired as he pulled out his watch. "Well, then, he cannot be far off now. Go, tell him to quit the main road and keep out of the way of the wounded going to the rear, for they might draw his own soldiers after them."

Gen. Desaix, hurrying on ahead of his command, found his general-in-chief in a council of war. Most of the circle of generals were urging a retreat. Desaix, however, raised his voice for a renewal of the fight. "One battle is lost," he said, "but it is only 3 o'clock. There is time enough to win another."

Napoleon at once sprang into his saddle and spurred his white horse among his retreating troops, forming them in line again in front of San Giuliano. His cocked hat blew off, but he rode on bareheaded through the ranks, shouting: "My friends, we have fallen back far enough. Remember, soldiers, it is my habit to bivouac on the field of battle."

Turned to Victory.

As the sun was descending to the Alpine horizon the Austrians leisurely moved forward from Marengo, with colors flying and bands playing. They were content to make certain that the enemy left the field and retreated, for to all the old generals of Europe war was only an interminable game of checkers, not a fight to a finish. On they went until they were within 100 paces of Desaix's force, but without seeing it through a field of high-standing wheat and the thick leaves of a vineyard that screened the French.

Suddenly the hidden army sprang at the surprised Austrians, and out of the grain and the vines blazed a heavy musketry fire. The line of white coats wavered, but quickly rallied. Soon, however, 600 French cavalry under young Kellermann dashed upon their flank and carried chaos among the Austrians. Their ranking officer and 6,000 men were taken prisoners.

The French line began to advance, and the victors of a few minutes before found themselves rolled back among the 10,000 dead and wounded lying on the plain. The retreating white coats hurried past Marengo, jumped the creek and then ran for their lives to the bridges over the River Bormida, where it flows between Alessandria and the battlefield. When night fell there was not an Austrian in arms on the field of Marengo.

The Men Who Won.

Desaix had been killed at the head of his column. Napoleon had lost a soldier for whom he felt a greater fondness than for any other in the army, and he said that death had shut his heart to the joy of victory. Bourrienne tells us the general-in-chief seemed on the point of crying as he exclaimed: "What a triumph this would have been if I could have embraced Desaix on the field of battle." Then he added, with quickly-rising spirits, "Little Kellermann made a lucky charge. We are much indebted to him. You see what trifling circumstances decide these affairs." To the general himself he only remarked, "You made a pretty good charge," and Kellermann is said to have replied: "I am glad you are satisfied. I have just placed the crown of France on your head."

It is doubtful if he dared really to say such a thing to Napoleon's face, but it is certain that as Napoleon always dated his nobility from Montenotte, he dated his royalty from Marengo—and they are not fifty miles apart by aeroplane.

Kellermann earned a double portion of gratitude at Marengo. Napoleon had not eaten for hours, when at 10 o'clock at night Kellermann spread before him and his generals a bountiful supper which he had brought from a convent—but history does not record the presence of chicken a la Marengo on that Menu!

A Stroke of Luck.

Napoleon had reaped probably his greatest harvest of glory on a field where his genius shone at its poorest. Although he had correctly foretold the battle nearly three months, it found him unready and absent from the scene until the fight was more than half over. As he saw his army smashed and driven from the plain, he contrived no timely expedient, no brilliant exploit to turn the engulfing tide of disaster, and he was saved at last by Desaix and by Kellermann.

Success came to him only as a stroke of luck. Yet it rightfully belonged to him, in accordance with the rules that govern our world of chance. He had surmounted the Alps and placed himself where luck could find him, where a few of Desaix's muskets and Kellermann's horses could win a great victory. The battle of Marengo really was won as Napoleon lay on the floor of the Tuileries in March, sticking red pins and black into the map of Italy.

The morning after the battle the Prince of Liechtenstein came out from Alessandria to sue for terms of peace. Napoleon offered to let Gen. Melas and his army retire beyond the Mincio, and thus leave France in possession of Lombardy and Piedmont. The prince demurred, but Napoleon replied: "Sir, carry my final determination to your general and return quickly. It is irrevocable. Know that I am as well acquainted with your position as you are yourselves. I did not begin to learn the art of war yesterday. I might insist on harder conditions, but I moderate my demands in consideration of the gray hairs of your general."

At the same time the First Consul ventured to address the Emperor of Austria directly with an appeal for a definite abandonment of the war, a communication which he opened with this dramatic picture: "It is on the field of Marengo, in the midst of suffering and surrounded by 15,000 corpses, that I conjure your majesty to listen to the cry of humanity."

While the Emepror refused to let the Italian disaster bring to an end his other campaign against the French in Germany, Napoleon had recaptured Italy in a day, yes, in an hour. All Europe lay cowed beneath the sword of Marengo, no nation rising to challenge it until five years had passed.

As Napoleon hastened back to Paris he was borne along on a wave of applause. "Well, Bourrienne," he said, "do you hear the acclamations resounding? That noise is as sweet to me as the voice of Josephine. How happy and proud I am to be loved by such a people."

Marengo Today.

When, in the course of my journey in "The Path of Napoleon," a taxicab carried me out of Alessandria, over the Bormida, which I could have dipped dry with a dipper, and across the historic Creek of Fontanone, I found at Marengo the best cherished of all the fields of Napoleon's victories. They lie generally in alien lands among conquered peoples, who naturally have not done much to commemorate his triumphs over them. His Italian victories, however, were not won against Italians, but against Austrians, and in the end United Italy slowly rose to independence from the battlegrounds of Napoleon.

The last of these, the climax, was Marengo. He fondly planned the erection of a monumental city there, a city of victories, with beautiful avenues bearing the names of his generals and adorned with temples and sculptures. But those castles of glory remained in the air, never emerging from his dreams into reality. Long after his bones were dust and his sword was rust a patriotic Italian of Alessandria bought Marengo and made it a Napoleonic museum.

About all there was to the village when the battle immortalized its name was an old roads de tavern, with its stables and sheds and its ancient tower, which legend ascribes to a palace erected there by Theodoric some 1400 years ago. Against the stony sides of those structures the red tide of battle surged and the laden hail pelted as the contending armies took and retook the sheltering walls.

A Memorial Palace.

The tavern still stands by the road, along which a rural trolley line now makes its way, and its sign, "Albergo Marengo" is covered with the scars of time if not of battle. The Albergo is unchanged by the years, and one might say unswept by the generations that have come and gone since Napoleon sat in its lee, beating up the dust with his riding whip. But against its wall and behind an iron fence, with golden tipped pikes and lances and battle axes on top of it, there rises the monumental palace built by the Alessandrian citizen.

I passed within this fence to find myself in the Court of Honor and standing beside a statue of the young First Consul, whose feet are planted on a block of red granite from the Alps which he crossed to write the name of Marengo on the list of his victories. The palace walls rising behind and on one side of the Court of Honor are entirely covered with most amazing frescoes, depicting the spires and domes and arches, avenues, palaces, temples and belvideres of Napoleon's dream City of Victories, as they might have looked if his dream had come true. Out of this gorgeous fantasy, the victor floats at full length while Victory crowns him with laurels, and Desaix, Kellermann and other generals are also portrayed.

Back of the palace are the old tavern stable and sheds, still echoing to the imagination the moans of the poor wounded fellows who were carried there from the battlefield. A stage coach of the Empress Marie Louise has been brought from somewhere and in all its gaudiness installed in a shabby barn.

Within the silent, untenanted palace itself is a gorgeous Gallery of Apotheosis, and there are also chambers lined with pistols, muskets, swords, sabers, knives, and all manner of rusty, murderous things raked in from the battlefield. The table on which Napoleon is said to have written his letter to the Emperor of Austria has been brought there, with the veritable quill, the veritable tin ink horn in which he dipped it, the veritable sand with which he dried his letter and the veritable receptacle for water in which he left the quill when he had finished. A high, slender-backed chair, like a piece of pulp furniture, whereon he is reputed to have sat—and napped—is treasured in a glass case, and above it are a nobby chapeau and a sword and scabbard crossed. They belonged to Desaix, but presumably were not worn in the battle, for Savary records that ghouls had stolen everything on him and stripped him naked before his body was cold.

Among the Dead.

Out in a pretty park—there are 300 acres in the reservation—is a marble bust of the fallen general in the midst of a leafy solitude, his shoulders, chin, cheeks, and brow black with the scribbled Italian names of visitors. A lovely belvidere rises in the shade of great trees, an altar against its inner wall. Through an opening in the center of the floor, a heap of bones surprises the gaze.

There in that pit are gathered the relics of the slain in a common pile, where the boys of France and the boys of Austria are mingling their dust as they mingled their blood in the creek out on the plain. May that mute brotherhood of the grave beneath the trees of Marengo be a prophecy of the brotherhood of man in the good time when battle flags shall be furled and war drums beat no more!

Out of the battle of Marengo came peace, the first that a war-worn world had known since monarchical Europe combined against the French Revolution eight years before. Austria was ready to lay down her arms at Napoleon's feet, but her ally, Great Britain, whose battlefield was the sea, had not felt the heavy hand of the conqueror. If she gave him peace on the water he would be able to re-enforce his army in Egypt and keep his foothold in the East.

The British, therefore, sent the Austrians an extra subsidy for the continuance of the campaign against French in Germany, which, however, was brought to a disastrous end by Gen. Moreau in a great French victory at Hohenlinden in the December following Marengo.

Napoleon now showed hardly less skill in the game of diplomacy than in the game of war.

He made his moves like an adept chessman. He brought Austria to harder terms than he had imposed at Campo Formio two years before, closed an ugly quarrel with the United States, made a trade with Spain for Louisiana and promoted a feud between Russia and the Baltic powers against Great Britain, which broke out into a naval war, culminating in the Battle of Copenhagen.

The British, with a population of 17,000,000, found themselves abandoned and alone in the long struggle with France, which now numbered 40,000,000 people. Since the war began in 1792, the expenditures of Great Britain had risen from $100,000,000 a year to $300,000,000, the income tax had been raised to 10 per cent and the national debt stood at $2,750,000,000.

Beneath those accumulated burdens England welcomed the relief that peace would bring, although looking upon it as hardly more than a brief truce, an experimental peace, as her statesmen described it. She did not yield until the French had lost Egypt and until she herself had little to lose from a breathing spell.

But it was no more than a postponement of the inevitable day of reckoning. Louis XIV pushed forward the frontiers of France, only to have them rolled back by jealous neighbors under Louis XV. When the revolution was assailed by foreign coalitions, the republican armies drove the invaders from French soil and enlarged the boundaries and influence of France more in six years than Louis XIV had expanded them in sixty. It was certain that this immense preponderance of France could not be maintained by Napoleon without fighting all Europe sooner or later. Nor could he yield an inch of ground without risk of being driven from power at home.

The treaty between England and France, which was signed at Amiens by Lord Cornwallis, of Yorktown memory, and by Joseph Bonaparte, enabled Napoleon, however, to sheathe his sword for a time and to exchange the camp of the soldier for the council of the statesman.

A Giant Among Kings.

An extraordinary condition of affairs among the heads of the other principal States of Europe gave Napoleon a great advantage. Besides France there were five important powers in that day, and three of them were ruled by monarchs with unbalanced minds, while the rulers of the remaining two were crowned mediocrities.

For a month at a time the progress of his insanity left George III incapable of holding communication with the British ministry. Charles IV, King of Spain, passed half his day in his workshop and stables dressed in a laborer's blouse, while the remaining half he hunted in the forest with hundreds of horses and servants, abandoning the government of his kingdom to Godoy, the paramour of his Queen. Paul, the Czar of Russia, was a prey to eccentricities and violent outbursts that amounted to madness. The throne of Prussia was occupied by a weakling, Frederick William III, while Francis I, of Austria, although a man of strong character, was a narrow-minded monarch bound to a dead past.

Napoleon stalked into the company of these royal incompetents a giant. He flattered the passions of the Czar and bore himself toward the reigning family in Spain as if he had been appointed by a probate court to be their guardian, while the Prussian King yielded to his mastery.

The republic saw its elected chief the overlord of royal Europe.

NAPOLEON'S MEASURE OF HIS FAME

A few more events like this campaign (Marengo) and my name may perhaps go down to posterity. In two years I have conquered Cairo, Paris, and Milan. But were I to die tomorrow I should occupy only half a page of general history at the end of ten centuries.—Quoted by Bourrienne.

NEXT SUNDAY—Napoleon, the Law Giver—A story of the great Concordat with Rome and the celebrated Code Napoleon.